

# THE HILL

## **Faster, smarter first responder funding**

**By Rep. Christopher Cox (R-Calif.)**

May 19, 2004

**Fact:** Of the \$6.3 billion in Department of Homeland Security (DHS) terrorism preparedness grants since Sept. 11, 2001, \$5.2 billion remains stuck in the administrative pipeline, unspent.

**Fact:** Forty percent of the total state terrorism preparedness grants are being allocated with no regard for the threat of a terrorist attack, the vulnerability of key assets, the terrorists' known capabilities and intentions, or even state or regional population. Almost as bad, the remaining 60 percent is allocated strictly according to population — the crudest form of approximating risk.

We can do better. H.R. 3266, the Faster and Smarter Funding for First Responders Act, reported unanimously by the full Select Committee on Homeland Security, tackles both problems head-on. That bill, which Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) has granted a time-limited referral to three other House committees, should be ready for floor action in June.

The problem with first-responder grants not getting to their intended destination is now well-known. In over 50 hearings, the Homeland Security Committee established that while DHS obligated 100 percent of its grant funds to states in a reasonable time, and while for the most part the states acted reasonably quickly to send the money through to local governments, the rest of the process has been largely a bureaucratic mess. Like a top-heavy hourglass, with many grains of sand slowly filtering their way to a choke point, today's process has Congress appropriating homeland security grants for first responders at levels more than 2,000 percent over 2001 — only to see police, fire and emergency medical responders continue to go begging.

As of April 2004, 85 percent of grants within the largest DHS first-responder grant programs had not yet been spent by local governments because of bureaucratic obstacles. These included lack of planning for grant expenditures, differing local requirements for municipal approval of expenditures, and even such anomalies as the requirement in New Hampshire that equipment purchases be approved at annual town meetings held only in March.



Perhaps the most significant obstacle for first responders is that homeland security grants are normally made for the purpose of reimbursing local expenditures. This has required local governments to come up with the money first — creating a chicken-and-egg situation in which federal grant money is available only in theory and cannot be spent.

H.R. 3266 will remedy these problems by doing exactly what its name implies — cutting red tape, and making the funding system for first responders risk-based so that grant money goes to where it is most needed more quickly.

To cut red tape, the bill starts with the fact that today states and localities apply for grant funding without having a clear assessment of their preparedness needs. Upon receiving funding, states may obligate it but won't spend it for months and sometimes years while determining exactly how to use the grant.

The bill addresses this issue squarely by requiring DHS to determine “essential capabilities” for different communities across America, establishing clear preparedness standards. The bill also establishes definitive timetables for states to spend federal funding.

These will also help reduce wasteful and capricious spending at the state and local level that occurs when low-risk areas receive unexpected windfalls of homeland security dollars.

To make homeland security grants “smarter,” the bill makes our best intelligence information the basis for first-responder grant distribution. This will end the current grant system for first responders based not on threat assessment, nor on need, but on political formulas.

Finally, H.R. 3266 will allow both interstate and large intrastate regions to address their shared terrorism preparedness needs by applying directly for DHS grants. Our continued dialogue with the first responder community has revealed that there are regions of the country with risks transcending territorial boundaries. Allowing regions to apply together for grant funding is a necessary response to the threat we face.

Homeland security is the essence of our national security. It cannot be burdened with pork and political formulas that fail to address our needs rationally. It must not be hobbled by bureaucratic inertia. We can do better, and we must.

We have come a long way in a short time, due in no small part to the investment that Congress and the president have made in terrorism preparedness funding. Since fiscal year 2001, the federal government has allocated over \$23.1 billion to state and local governments to enhance their ability to prevent, prepare for and respond to acts of terrorism. But without enactment of H.R. 3266, even that level of commitment won't do the job. It's time to provide our first responders the real help they so desperately need.

Cox is chairman of the House Select Committee on Homeland Security.